2014

Kapsula

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On the cover: MEGAN MORMAN Shawna Dempsey fusible plastic bead portrait 2013

PROOF 21

GALLERY 44

AIDAN COWLING
BRETT GUNDLOCK
LINDSAY FISHER
MICHELLE O'BYRNE
MEGAN MORMAN

G44

CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

KAPSULA

SPECIAL ISSUE

PROOF 21

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Proof 21

JUNE 20, 2014 - JULY 26, 2014

Opening Reception
FRIDAY JUNE 20, 6PM - 8PM

Artist Talk
FRIDAY JUNE 20, 5PM - 6PM

On the cover

MEGAN MORMAN

Shawna Dempsey
fusible plastic bead portrait
2013

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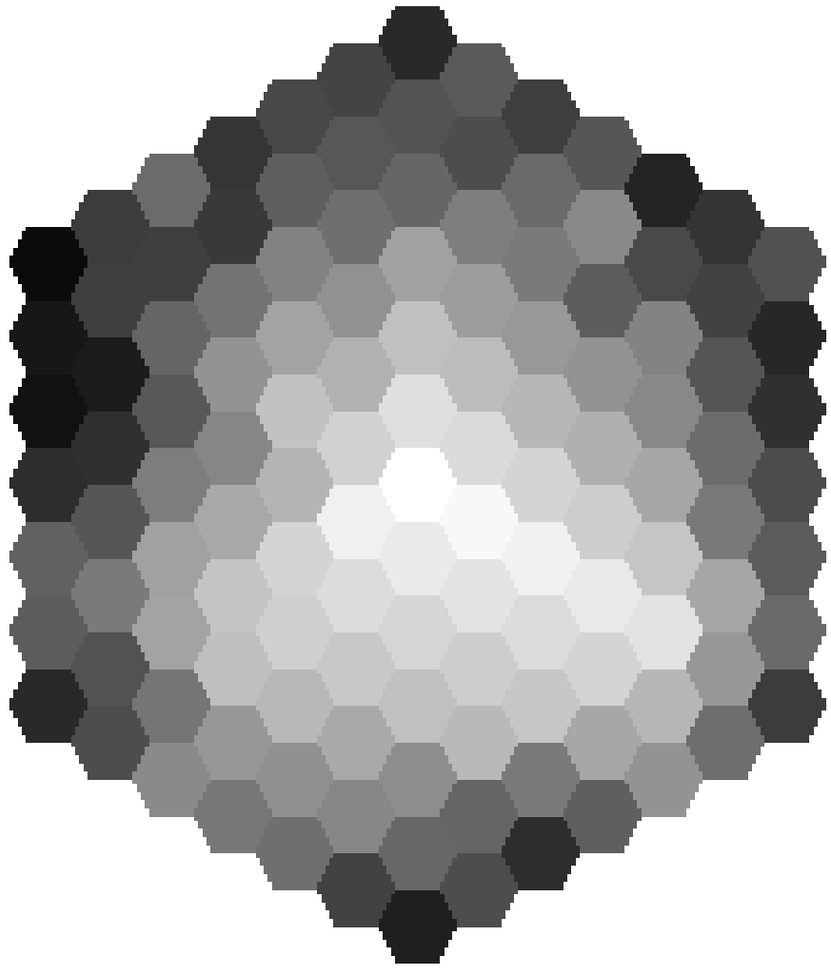
The guessing game is fun!



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Aidan Cowling, *craigslist #3*, 30 x 22 inch black and white photo transfer and graphite on cotton rag paper, 2014

Introduction

Noa Bronstein

A symbolic marker, age 21 is an entry into adulthood. With this in mind, Gallery 44's emerging artist exhibition, *Proof 21*, takes on a thematic focus for the first time. This annual exhibition of photo-based works by Canadian artists reflects a range of current concerns and practices in contemporary photography from across the country. *Proof* is often one of the first exhibitions in a professional context for an emerging artist as was the case for artists such as Karin Bubas, Janieta Eyre, Isabelle Hayeur, Germaine Koh, Nicholas Pye, Althea Thauberger and Andrew Wright.

In celebration of WorldPride 2014 taking place in Toronto, *Proof 21* provides a platform for highlighting human rights issues and activism, while also exploring identity, gender and sexual constructs and the politics of representation.

The featured artists in *Proof 21* offer unique approaches to the thematically centred exhibition with works ranging from plastic bead portraits to the essayistic and highly personal. For the publication we have invited four writers to engage with the focus of the exhibition, providing *carte blanche* for considering the themes presented by the artists. We hope you will enjoy the range of perspectives brought together in this hybrid journal / diary / catalogue.

Gallery 44 would like to thank *Proof 21* artists Aidan Cowling, Brett Gundlock, Lindsay Fisher, Megan Morman and Michelle O'Byrne, for their ability to foster dialogue and take risks. Thank you to Erin Silver, Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay, Syrus Marcus Ware and Sky Gilbert, we are most grateful for your contributions to this publication. We would also like to thank KAPSULA Magazine for partnering on this publication. In particular, Caoimhe Morgan-Feir and Zach Pearl for their guidance and insights in supporting this endeavor. Thank you also to my fellow *Proof 21* jury members, Morris Lum, Steven Beckly and John G Hampton.

Finally, thank you to the many supporters of Gallery 44, to our members, board of directors, the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council, and Canada Council for the Arts.

Noa Bronstein
Head of Exhibitions and Publications
Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography

Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography is a non-profit artist-run centre committed to photography as a multi-faceted and ever-changing art form. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of photography, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography and its related practices. Gallery 44 offers exhibition and publication opportunities to national and international artists, award-winning education programs, and affordable production facilities for artists. Through its programs, Gallery 44 is engaged in changing conceptions of the photographic image and its modes of production.

Lindsay Fisher, still from video *It's just that easy*, 2013

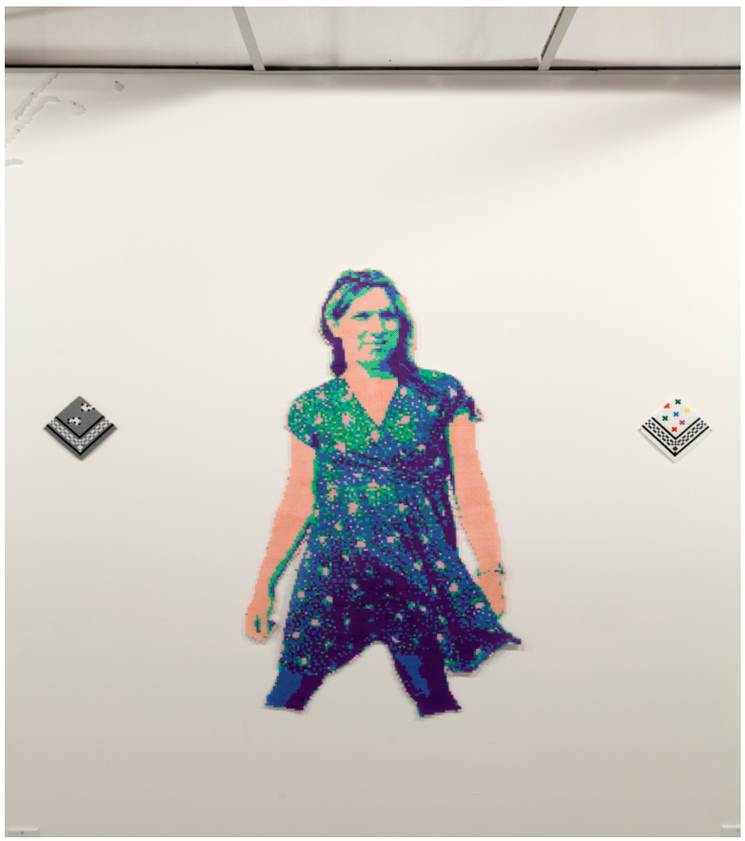
Prologue

Noa Bronstein & Caoimhe Morgan-Feir

We live in watchful times. In 1977, Michel Foucault codified the 19th century as a period of "compulsive visibility," suggesting a state of constant (often self-imposed) surveillance.[1] While the 21st century may not feel entirely dystopic, compulsive visibility has undeniably increased in recent decades. With the advent of social media, the minutia of everyday life becomes routinely broadcasted and shared. Even supposedly private information, such as email and telephone correspondence, has been intercepted and co-opted by governmental bodies. Yet, visibility is not absolute—it is often illusive to some and heavily guarded by others.

Grappling for visibility and against infringements on privacy have been mainstays of queer activism and queer art. These struggles have become historical landmarks: New York's Stonewall riots in 1969, Toronto's own bathhouse riots of 1981 and AIDS activism throughout the 80s (including the group ACT UP) are just a few notable examples. Taken together, the artists featured in *Proof 21* continue questioning and fighting for visibility. And yet, despite the inherently personal undertones of this exercise, their works largely eschew the obviously autobiographical. Utilizing portraiture, documentary photography, digital detritus and non-figurative objects, they each point towards broader politics of representation. They look outward to suggest that, when creating accounts of others, we are ultimately creating accounts of ourselves.

Exploiting the often-marginalized apparatus of craft, Megan Morman uses hyper-coloured, fusible, plastic toy beads to produce life-sized portraits of queer artists and performers, through which she curates her fantasy art party. As with other artisanal outputs, the process is a laboured one, with each portrait containing thousands of beads. Based on photographs



Megan Morman, *Morgan Sea*, 48 x 20 inch fusible plastic bead portrait, 2013

Megan Morman, installation documentation of *Art Party* at Stride Gallery (Calgary), 2014

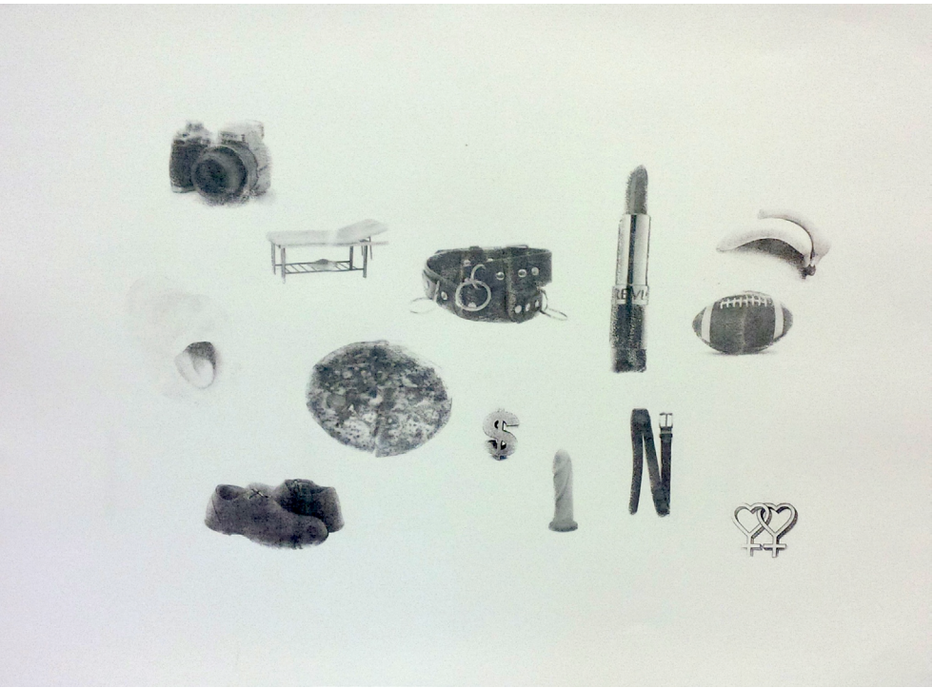
of informal moments, the beads generate a kind of pixelated rendering. The low-res effect points to a transitory encounter; as if these images might not have been intended for exhibition. *Art Party* is not all child's play. Amongst the portraits of Shawna Dempsey or Mikiki, Morman reveals a nuanced coding. The diamond shaped handkerchiefs represent a linguistic system that has been used to indicate sexual desires, while subverting dialogue. Pairing these diamond handkerchiefs with frolicking cats confounds kitsch with kink—Morman's gestures rebuff any kind of indexical strictures.

Brett Gundlock's project *El Pueblo (The Community)* could also be categorized as portraiture, but portraits of a town rather than individuals. Photographing Cherán, Mexico, Gundlock documents activism and resistance. In 2011, a group of corrupt and exploitative loggers descended on the town, taking hold of resources and threatening the sustenance of the community. Using rocks and fireworks, a group of elderly women incited the town to revolt. Inspired by these actions, farmers, teachers, doctors and many others formed Autodefensa (self-defence) groups, working collaboratively to suppress organized crime. Of course, it is not quite this simple. Gundlock's essayist images are not meant to vilify or romanticize this conflict. Rather, he is able to assist in making visible the spaces and individuals that exist within this complex place.

Turning to the Internet, Lindsay Fisher explores on-line video blogging sites and how-to videos that codify particular notions of beauty and normalcy. *It's just that easy* mimics scripts of tips for applying make-up or grooming through which Fisher confronts illusions of the idyllic. The aping, however, does not serve to perpetuate standards but rather to disrupt these specific procedures of primping. Ultimately the instruction becomes the wireframe. The performance then is the metadata, committing to collective muscle memory an allowance for failure and imperfection. In her accompanying video project *Suspended girl* and *My selfie* Fisher constructs animated portraits that parody the animated gif. The satirization of excessive online representation attempts to negotiate the institutional parameters of the *right* kind of body and identity.

Brett Gundlock, *The Living*, 20 x 20 inch digital c-print, 2012

Lindsay Fisher, still from video *It's just that easy*, 2013



▲
Aidan Cowling, *craigslist #4* 30 x 22 inch, black and white photo transfer and graphite on cotton rag paper, 2014

▶
Michelle O'Byrne, *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park*, 12 x 16 inch inkjet print with white finishing nails, 2014

Taking a non-figurative turn, Aidan Cowling archives digital ephemera and considers how desire is visualized in objects. Cowling culls images from the "casual encounters" section of craigslist and reproduces these in black and white photo transfers. Through this transference between photography and drawing, the digital and the physical, and between queer and non-defined spaces (if such a thing exists), Cowling's etchings unpack the borders that mediate standards of representation. The initial interest in craigslist reflected the artist's own desires. The process itself, however, de-eroticizes and therefore becomes less about individual desire and more about anonymity, abstraction and the unexpected ways we enter into foreign or familiar intimacies.

Sharing in Cowling's impulse to mine from readily available materials, Michelle O'Byrne traces the surplus value contained in images and objects. Her collage and sculptural works combine seemingly arbitrary ephemera—a sea shell, blue string, magazine cut outs of kittens and glass plates—in order to compose a narrative that reveals widely held social mythologies, while addressing representation in pop culture. Deconstructing stock images and reconstructing new realities allows O'Byrne to assert her own agency and to encourage viewers to do the same. The artist's gestures leave room for the unintended, for interpretation, inviting us to look harder at how images circulate and where they land.

This directive—to look closer, look harder, runs throughout the work of all the artists included in *Proof 21*. In a world where visibility, compulsive or not, is so widely trafficked, this directive is essential. No matter the configuration—between acquaintances or strangers, objects or people, in immediate space or online—observation is never passive. A loaded activity, it must be undertaken carefully.

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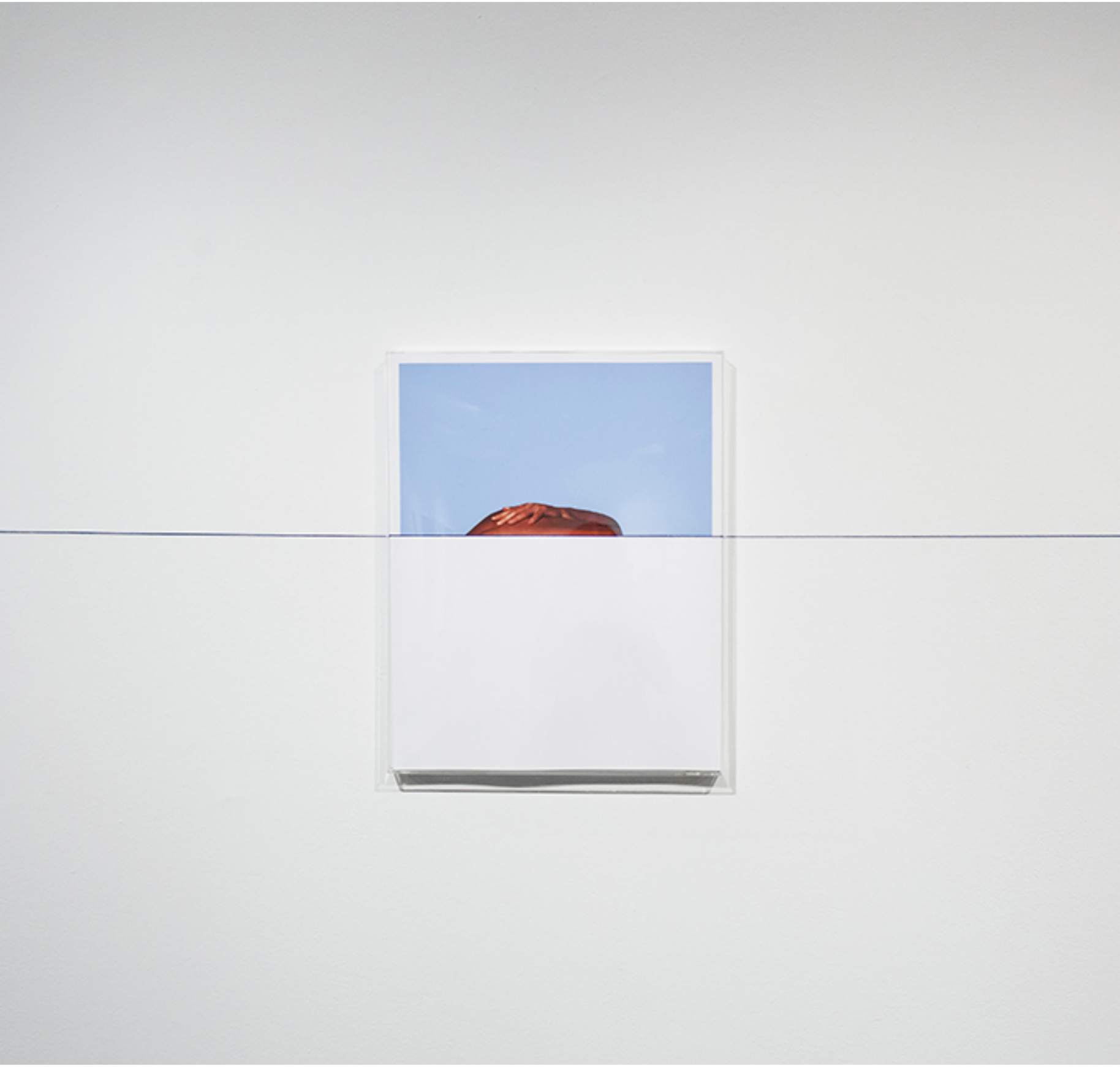

Michelle O'Byrne, installation documentation of *Embracing as a romantic couple on a tropical beach destination* at the Charles H. Scott Gallery (Vancouver), 2014

Thinking about the "re-"ification currently underway in contemporary art (taxonomized, at the end of 2013, by Martha Buskirk, Amelia Jones and Caroline Jones, who observed the "extraordinary number of returns, revisits, and repetitions of all kinds this past year..."[1]), I am inspired to re-consider precedent "re-"s: to begin with, American conceptual artist Glenn Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-1993), in which the artist disassembled the late Robert Mapplethorpe's provocative *Black Book* (1986)—a "lookbook" of black male bodies operating at the border of classical Modernist aesthetics and the equally Modernist performance of the exoticizing, fetishistic gaze—pairing its incised pages with quotes from a variety of sources to make a new picture of the complicated racialized dynamics and representations on view.

Ligon's appropriative work did not lead the artist to make a decisive judgment on Mapplethorpe's photographs but resulted, instead, in a more ambiguous reading. As Ligon stated, "I asked myself if those photographs were racist. I realized then that the question was too limiting, that it was more complicated. Can we say that Mapplethorpe's work is documentary or fetishistic? Maybe, but at the same time he put black men into a tradition of portraiture to which they've never had access before."[2] Like Ligon's politically ambiguous reading of Mapplethorpe, Ligon's own work is often understood to *obscure* the political. Critic Carly Berwick's take on *Notes on the Margin* points simultaneously to the problem and pleasure of its reception: "the project fascinates, in part, because its complexities allow it to rise above a simple exercise in identity-oriented art." [3] Identity-oriented, of course, refers, here, to identity politics: the identity politics of the 1993 Whitney Biennial—the "political" or "multicultural" Biennial in which Ligon's *Notes on the Margin* first appeared. Just as Ligon's aesthetic strategy "fascinates," so, too, does Berwick's assessment: it praises Ligon for politically-infused work that sneaks by the rigid dictates separating art and politics, but also suggests the unambiguously political to be obscurant to a work's favourability. Indeed, Ligon's appropriative act—formalistically beautiful and ideologically complex—might be seen to have worked at a threshold between the "politically correct" atmosphere of the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which critics decried for treating art "as if pleasure were a sin,"[4] and the high-concept artifice of work produced in the era and the celebration of "poetics rather than polemics." *Poetics rather than polemics*: a phrase penned by curator Lawrence Rinder in his catalogue essay for the groundbreaking exhibition *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, which was held only two years after the 1993 Whitney Biennial at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum. [5] Co-curators Rinder and Nayland Blake insisted on the inclusion of both queer and straight artists and resisted inscribing the show with an explicitly queer title, arguing that "essentializ[ing] the work of these artists in the title" would have the effect of "limit[ing] the viewers' chances of being able to find new information and connections among the works."[6] (The inclusion of queer and straight artists echoes curator Dan Cameron's earlier argument around his pioneering 1982 New Museum exhibition *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*, that, "To assume that gay content cannot be present with-

out a strong and clear indication that someone involved has sex with members of the same gender is to underestimate both the flexibility of the idea of content and the gay imagination." [7]) *In a Different Light*, an exhibition that was undeniably about queer art and sexual practices, somewhat paradoxically attempted to evade identification as such, managing, as well, to resist being boxed in politically in a way that critics argued worked against a reading of the 1993 Whitney Biennial as pleasurable.

In the present moment, I wonder if we find ourselves in a similar transitional space to the one outlined above. Thinking about the short history of queer exhibitions—from the more covert, infiltrating curatorial initiatives of the 1980s to the large-scale institutional co-option of queer culture in the 2010s—it is, of course, important to bear in mind temporal specificity and the possibilities for queer representation afforded by earlier curatorial strategies. Briefly underlining one particular shift, from polemics to poetics, I am not looking to present a definitive view to the present day condition of queer culture, but to argue, in 2014 (which might be seen to mark the twenty-year anniversary—and, perhaps, a *re-staging*—of the transitional moment, or threshold, described above), that if queer as an aesthetic category maintains relevance in the contemporary moment, it does so not when used as a vague framework for otherwise incongruent methods, ideas, and content or when divorced from its historical foundations in political struggle, but when it explicitly evokes the *past* of queer and, in so doing, performs its own "re"-ifying gesture. In this, a queer indexicality is formed, one that demands of queer images that they bridge the referential, the representative, and the conceptual and, in so doing, also unabashedly heed the political.

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Erin Silver

completed a PhD in Art History and Gender & Women's Studies at McGill University in 2013, focusing on queer and feminist cultural production. She has curated exhibitions at the FOFA Gallery and at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, and is working on an exhibition on immersion and synesthesia in queer intermedia practices, to open at the Doris McCarthy Gallery in 2015. Her writing has been published in *C Magazine*, *Ciel Variable*, *Fuse Magazine* and *No More Potlucks*. She is co-editing (with Amelia Jones) a volume entitled *Sexual Differences and Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

Brett Gundlock, *Boy on Horse*, 16 x 22 inch digital c-print, 2012

Brett Gundlock, *Car Fire*, 16 x 22 inch digital c-print, 2013

A LETTER OF APOLOGY

Dear Frank:

Last night I came across a cache of old photos and invitations to teenage parties. I found them in a box of miscellaneous keepsakes: letters, activist badges, men's phone numbers scrawled on torn matchboxes and a few champagne corks of forgotten provenance. My old Polaroid camera was there, too. It was a box out of use, full of things from another time. The kind of box that only comes into being after many years of living.

I found a photograph of you, the only one I have, likely the only one I ever took. It was taken at the McMichael Collection in Kleinburg, in the gardens, on the day it ended. You are standing in a grove of camellia trees. The sunlight is low and golden, painting a magic-hour colour across your face. The date is printed on the back of the photograph in digital letters: 18NOV91.

I found myself projecting the events of that afternoon onto your expression in the picture, which serves as the only trace of our affair. You are smiling placidly, but through the lens of memory I see a shade of discomfort, an anxiety from knowing you would tell me the news of your diagnosis later that afternoon. Your attention is elsewhere: your eyes are looking at the camera, but I can't help but feel that your mind, or perhaps your heart, is looking away. Looking sideways. Your thirty years seemed so old to my eighteen at the time, but now that I have surpassed your age in the photograph by almost a decade, I can see how beautifully young and fragile you really were.

My instinct is to use my youth as an excuse for reacting the way I did on that day. I had been socializing as a gay man for only a few short months; I still saw the crisis from outside, with suburban teenage ignorance, not from within the community. Not from the vantage point of reflection and experience I have now. I had no analysis of the what and why of the situation, and instead I culpabilized you, blaming you for putting me at risk, making myself the victim somehow, creating a reason to end the affair.

I was wrong.

I placed the photograph on the table and took the Polaroid camera out of its box. Incredibly, there were three unused receiving prints still in the cartridge. I stood up and held the camera above the picture and re-photographed your face, shielding the flash with my finger. The camera made a clicking, whizzing sound, and ejected a glossy new photograph into my hand. I watched the milky grey emulsion begin to darken, and your countenance appear as though emerging from a dissipating fog.

Watching the photograph develop in my hands created the strange sensation of you being present in the room with me. It was as though I had just photographed you, right then, right there, the developing Polaroid evidence of your existence. This act created the feeling of a parallel time and space, summoning a thirty-year-old Frank, enveloped by camellia trees right there in my bedroom.

I photographed you again, using up the last two prints, extending the illusion of your presence, offering a chance to ask your forgiveness. A chance to tell you

what I wish I could say to your face: that I was wrong, that I am ashamed for not standing by you at that critical moment twenty-two years ago. That I have learned, that I have seen, that I have gone all the way into the story. That I visit the monument in Cawthra Park and press my finger against your name. That we are living now.

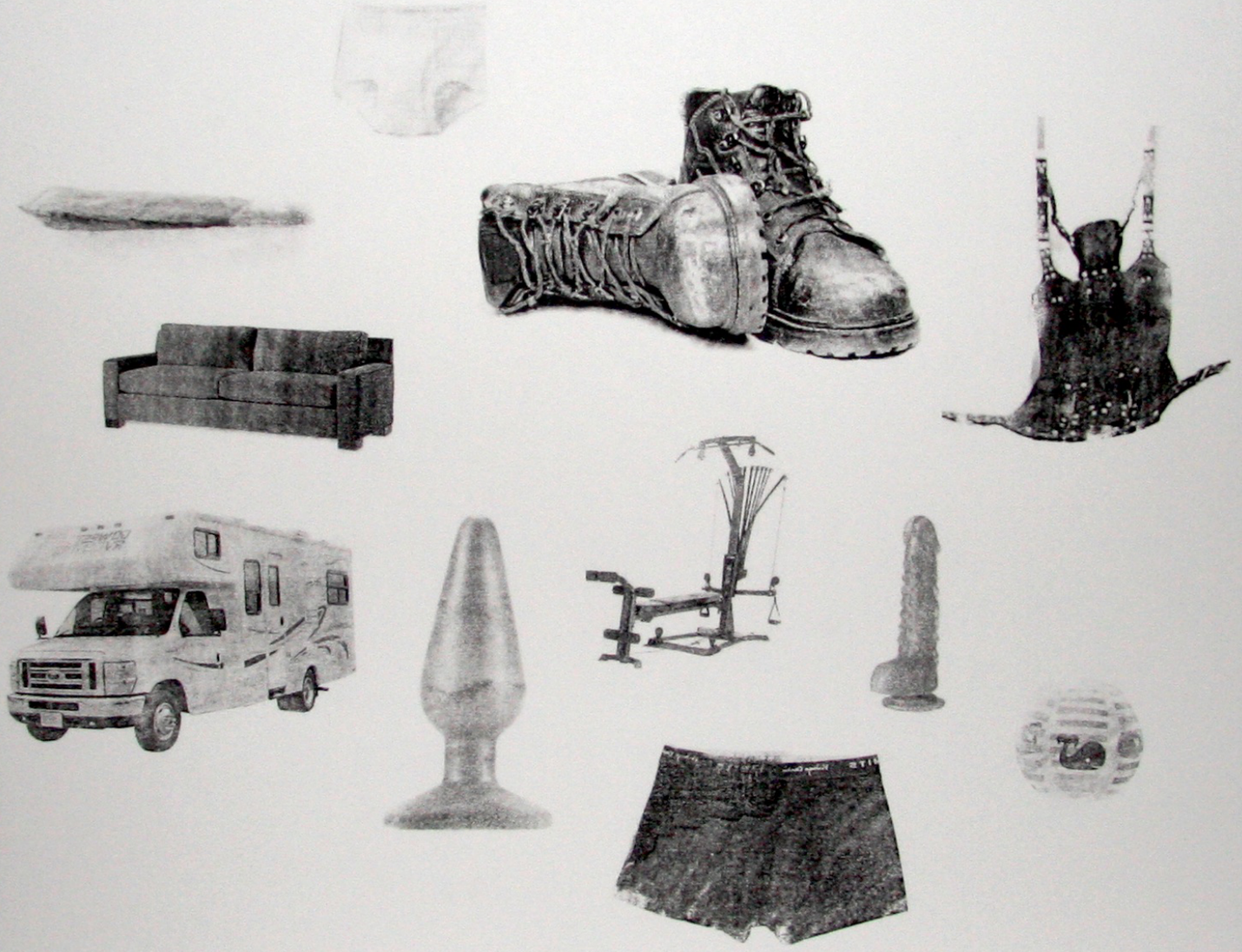
Sincerely,

Benny

NEMEROFSKY RAMSAY

Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay

is an artist and diarist. His work in video, sound, and text contemplates the history of song, the rendering of love and emotion into language, and the resurrection and manipulation of voices from history—sung, spoken or screamed. Nemerofsky's work has been exhibited internationally, appearing in numerous private collections as well as the National Gallery of Canada and the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.



Aidan Cowling, *craigslist #2*, 30 x 22 inch black and white photo transfer and graphite on cotton rag paper, 2013

I am as I am

I'm made that way
When I feel like laughing
I burst right out
I love the one who loves me
Is it my fault especially
If it's not the same one
I love each time

— *Jacques Prevert* Paroles *(translated by Lawrence Ferlinghetti)*

Prevert is one of my favourite poets, and not just because his last name sounds a bit like 'pervert.' He is long forgotten now except perhaps for his film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Prevert is on the side of the child against the adult, and the lover against the policeman. He is also on the side of birds everywhere. The above poem is a song as well, written for a prostitute to sing. It was recorded by Arletty for *Les Enfants* but never made it into the film.

I identify with Prevert's prostitute. This is the way I am; I am promiscuous. You can say: 'Oh but how can you say that in the age of AIDS?'

That view is terribly shortsighted. I mean it deeply lacks historical perspective. Prostitutes at the beginning of the last century had to deal with syphilis. For them syphilis was deadly—there were no 'cocktails' (except for a dry martini, which, after all, is only good at helping you forget).

I am a whore man, a whore boy, sometimes even a whore girl (when I dress up).

This is my identity.

This does not mean, of course, that I am not civil. Promiscuous people know better than anyone where and when to do it and not to do it, and they certainly don't want to sleep with everyone, and most likely do not wish to sleep with your son or daughter (so relax, will you?). But nevertheless they want to fuck a lot of people. And thank God, there are a lot of people in the world to fuck.

Is it old fashioned for me to speak of identity in this way?

It may appear so to those who have attended too many courses at the university level. But even Judith Butler is not antagonistic to labels—merely ambivalent. We are tribal. Our brains were formed on the savannahs. We hunted and gathered. We have always been proud of who we are and suspicious of outsiders.

But *must* these two things go together?

'Oh please!', you say, confident you can change human nature—'Let's get rid of sexualities, genders, nationalism and all the horrible things that separate us!'

Sorry, but human beings just aren't made that way.

Instead what is required is a radical understanding of difference. One thinks of Derrida's 'differance.' 'Who we are' can only be understood in relationship to someone else (I am promiscuous; I am not like those homos who stay at home, read and garden, hugging their dogs.) Difference is not important (just as Derrida's celebrated definition of meaning—'differance' is slippery) except: it is the most important thing in the world.

Last night I was sitting in a restaurant talking about sex with a friend. (After all what else is there to talk about, really?) I guess we were too loud. A woman wearing a hijab was sitting at the table next to us. She and her companions expressed offense.

I would want to reverse that offense.

For instance, I would like *not* to be offended by the hijab.

Instead I could be fascinated by your fear of rape (I am a man, it is not something I have ever had to deal with, knock on wood). I am the opposite of one who wears a hijab: I am a fearless exhibitionist. But what is it like to be covered in public, perhaps even from head to toe, for your whole life, with only a small window opening up for sexual intercourse, late at night?

Is that how you live? Excuse me; I am only imagining and cannot know. But I am interested, not offended. Tell me who you are. Show me the details of what makes you so different from me.

For then surely, will the twain, not someday, meet?

And does the possibility for that meeting come not from 'tolerance' or from discarding 'identity politics,' but from a passionate curiosity that grows out of the knowledge that there is something that can be learned from the life of every human being no matter how alien they may seem to us at first sight?

There is a glory in exploring that which seems to be the very opposite of you; that which you are afraid of and repulsed by.

This is difference.

This is the way I am; yes I'm just made this way.

Sure, we should all be horrified by murder and rape, because these are evil things. But even more frightening sometimes are the horrifying customs, costumes, ideas, ways of organizing gender and ways of having sex that are so different from our own!

I dare you to try and understand that which—to you—may seem completely alien. Nay, even horrifying.

I dare you.

Novelist, poet, filmmaker, director, actor, and drag queen extraordinaire... ***Sky Gilbert*** is one of Canada's most controversial artistic forces. He was the co-founder and Artistic Director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, for 18 years. In 1997 Sky Gilbert left Buddies to have more time for creative pursuits. At Buddies, Gilbert wrote and directed his own hit plays, including THE DRESSING GOWN (published by the Playwright's Union 1989) and PLAYMURDER (published by Blizzard in 1995). Sky started making films in 1990 and has written/directed/produced three films which have played at film festivals around the world including Hong Kong, London, San Francisco, LA and Melbourne. Sky has published 5 novels—his most recent novel *Brother Dumb* (2007 ECW Press) was described by Canada's *Quill and Quire* as "a well paced and provocative book that sets itself an enormous creative challenge." Sky is also an Assistant Professor in The School of English and Theatre Studies at Guelph University. In 2005 Sky received his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto. In 2006, Dr. Gilbert was honoured to be named University Research Chair in Creative Writing and Theatre Studies at Guelph.

Above: Michelle O'Byrne, installation documentation of *close-up portrait of beautiful young woman in white blouse at park* at the Charles H. Scott Gallery (Vancouver), 2014. **Below**: Michelle O'Byrne, installation documentation of *Embracing as a romantic couple on a tropical beach destination* at the Charles H. Scott Gallery (Vancouver), 2014

Activist Love Letters

"come. i say come, and return to the fight. this fight for the earth, this fight for our children this fight for our life…i say come, wrap your feet around justice, i say come, wrap your tongues around truth…come to this battlefield called life"

Sonia Sanchez (1999)

Have you ever wondered what propels someone to make change in their community? I've been doing an activist-based performance project called "Activist Love Letters" for a few years based on this question. It is rooted in the powerful and often hidden letters that activists have sent to each other—words of support and encouragement, words of rage and fear, cautions and inspirations alike. The project encourages the viewer/audience to think about their own organizing, and their role in sustaining and supporting a movement. The performance asks: "If you could reach out to one person whose actions move you, who would it be? What would you say?"

As a kid, my dad told me a story about his teenhood during Freedom Summer.[1] My dad was approached to participate in a sit-in at the local Walgreens counter in Memphis and across the state border in Mississippi. A bunch of kids were planning to sit down at the segregated lunch counter and quietly eat their lunch. No matter what happened to them, they were to stay seated, until the police forcefully dragged them off the seats, or worse. My dad chose not to go. His exact wording was, "I told them, 'I can eat my lunch anywhere.'" I respect his choice not to go. It was a terrifying time, and the stakes were incredibly high.[2]

I have always remembered his story, perhaps because I like to think that I would have gone to the sit-in. The hypothetical narrative plays out in my head. But would I have gone, if in the same (high risk) situation? I might not have. I am conscious of our tendency towards revisionist history that suggests that *everyone* always gets involved. *Everyone* went to the March on Washington. *Everyone* was part of Freedom Summer. *Everyone*. The numbers of participants[3] in any of these moments of resistance suggest that it could not have been possible that everyone went. Some went, some didn't. I'm fascinated by this choice—to 'go or not to go.' This 'choice' guides my work as an artist and activist.

An Audience of Enablers Cannot Fail

In 2012 I was invited to host a film screening as part of a larger project entitled, "All Hands on the Archives/ An Audience of Enablers Cannot Fail" (2012). The project aimed to animate the Cinenova collection, a UK-based film and video archive featuring a large assortment of films by women and trans filmmakers. The project was an initiative of the Feminist Art Gallery, The Power

Plant and the Art Gallery of York University in conjunction with the AGYU retrospective exhibition "Will Munro: History, Glamour, Magic" (2012).

I screened films [4] that spoke of activism, hope, rage and social change. Following the films I read aloud from activist-penned letters, specifically: a letter that author James Baldwin (1970) sent to Angela Davis [5] while she was in prison; a letter that Leonard Peltier (unknown date) [6] wrote from within prison to Mumia Abu Jamal, also in prison, encouraging him to stay strong, to keep fighting; and a letter that Toronto activist Tooker Gomberg (2002) [7] wrote to all community mobilizers encouraging each of us to take care of each other and ourselves. I then invited the audience to write their own letters to someone active in our communities, as a kind of "Activist Love Letter."

"Activist Love Letters" have since been performed across the country. The project involves reading letters aloud and creating new letters as an act of community building and mobilizing. I provide the audience with short bios of activists in their communities. There are hand-made cards, markers and (of course) fancy stickers. Before mailing the letters, I include a little blurb about the project in the envelope and invite people to reply.

The majority of people who reply say that they are stunned to receive a letter, a shared story, or thanks for their work. Some replies describe receiving their letter at a moment when they are at a crossroads in their lives and getting a letter at the exact right moment seems to have an empowering effect. It is significant to receive an outpouring of love from a complete stranger. People who have written letters during the performances have also told me that the process has made them consider their own movement building/activism. "Activist Love Letters" is about connecting us all, building community, supporting activists and encouraging all of our work. It is building the kind of world where we all get to be.

Notes

[1] Doug McAdam, "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer," *American Journal of Sociology*, 92.1 (1986): 64-90.

[2] Those lunch counter sit-ins got very violent, and while some establishments like Woolworths ended up integrating, Walgreens closed down their lunch counters all together.

[3] For example, the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" happened in Washington, D.C., on August 28, 1963. Over 250,000 people attended the march, and, at the time, it was considered the largest demonstration ever seen in the nation's capital. 250,000 is a massively impressive number, but there would have been millions there if 'everyone' who said that they attended had actually attended. See http://www.core-online.org/History/washington_march.htm for more information.

[4] Pratibha Parmar's *A Place of Rage* (1991) and Melanya Liwanag Aguila's *Within These Cages* (2002).

[5] James Baldwin, "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis," *The New York Review of Books* 15.12 (1971), accessed May 20, 2014.

[6] "Leonard Peltier's letter to Mumia Abu Jamal," accessed May 20, 2014.

[7] Tooker Gomberg, "Letter to an Activist, Earth Day, 2002," accessed on May 20, 2014.

Syrus Marcus Ware

is a visual artist, community activist, researcher, youth-advocate and educator. He is the Program Coordinator of the AGO Youth Program, Art Gallery of Ontario. As a visual artist, Syrus works within the mediums of painting, installation and performance to challenge systemic oppression. Syrus' work explores the spaces between and around identities, acting as provocations to our understandings of gender, sexuality and race. His work has been exhibited at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), Gladstone Hotel, ASpace Gallery, Harbourfront Centre, SPIN Gallery and other galleries across Canada. His work has been reproduced in *FUSE Magazine, The Globe and Mail, THIS Magazine, Blackness* and *Sexualities*, amongst others. His work has also been included in several academic journals including *Small Axe* and *Women and Environment International*.

Lindsay Fisher
still from video *It's just that easy*
2013

Artist bios

Aidan Cowling

is a Toronto-based artist and curator who works in a variety of media including, photo, installation, maps and web based projects. His work explores the intersection of queerness and materiality and attempts to uncover the landscapes and language of sexual liberation. He is a part of various collectives and has been shown in galleries internationally including Yogiga Gallery, Hangram Design Museum, Gallery 44, YYZ and Xpace.

Brett Gundlock

is a Toronto-based freelance photographer and a founding member of the Boreal Collective. After working for three years as a staff photographer at National Post, Gundlock struck out on his own. He now divides his time between assignment work and personal photographic interests. Gundlock's images explore the subcultures that exist in tandem with mainstream culture. Skinheads, 2010 G-20 detainees, and recent immigrants are several of the marginalized groups Gundlock has worked with. In 2014, he will be continuing to create work in Mexico and the Alberta Oilsands. The intersections of journalism and conceptual art are a continued focus for Gundlock's photography. Blurring the arbitrary boundaries between these photographic styles is one of his frequent explorations.

Lindsay Fisher

is a visual artist with various practices in digital media, photography, illustration, textiles and graphic arts. Her work often reflects an investigation into identity, the body, and notions of difference. Her recent work in digital media and embroidery explores representations of gender and sexuality within the context of online media with an interest in how individuals negotiate, interact and experience different understandings of sex and gender. Lindsay holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Emily Carr University and a Bachelor of Graphic Design from OCAD University. She currently works in Toronto.

Michelle O'Byrne

was born in Dublin, Ireland and currently resides in Vancouver. She holds a BFA in Photographic Studies from Ryerson University and is currently completing an MA in Visual Arts at Emily Carr University of Art & Design. Her work has been exhibited in various galleries across Canada and internationally.

Megan Morman

maintains a transdisciplinary visual practice that explores the roles of gossip, storytelling and play in establishing the professional identities of artists and cultural workers. Her portraits and text-based installations have shown in solo exhibitions at galleries across Canada, including the Art Gallery of Alberta (Edmonton), Stride (Calgary), Neutral Ground (Regina), Artspace (Peterborough) and Galerie Sans Nom (Moncton). Morman grew up in rural Minnesota, and spent 15 years working in queer/arts non-profits in Saskatoon before moving to Lethbridge in 2012.